April 26/27, 2009

Facing Depression

Facing our Stuff: Finding Hope in Our Hurts, Hang-Ups and Habits

2 Corinthians 1:3-11

Pastor Mark Kremer

Monologue:

"Hello. My name is Oswald Chambers. You probably know me best for my book *"My Utmost for His Highest"* but few know a darker side to my story. In early 1897, I had renounced my personal ambitions to follow God…and then He asked me to cut the cords of a relationship with a woman I had loved for many years. If there was anything else that I loved ahead of God, I was ready to place that on the altar as well. Whether I willingly laid my hopes and dreams on that altar or they seemed to be snatched from me by the hand of God, the pain of heartbreak and loss felt the same. I did not experience the power and presence of God after these renouncements; instead I became even more aware of my own sinfulness than before. I could have plucked out my offending eye or cut off my right hand, but I could not escape the plague of my own heart. My high visibility in Christian circles seems to accentuate my own inner emptiness and longing. So, for the last four long years, nothing but the overruling grace of God and the kindness of friends has kept me out of an asylum. I long for peace in my soul, but find only turmoil inside and out. Now, a young woman in a local church has accused me of misconduct. It is more than I can bear. There is no truth to this story and I will be vindicated, but this incident has made me acutely aware of what lies within me. I have not sinned with this girl, but I know that I *could* have. And the realization of what I am capable of thinking and doing oppresses my mind. The shame and hypocrisy I detest in others has a foothold in my own heart. I know the truth about myself. Within me lurks a frightening pride that is beyond my power to conquer. The sense of depravity, the vileness and the bad motivation of my nature is terrific. How can I speak to others of God when the deepest realities elude me? What right do I have to represent Christ when my own heart is so filled with the selfish impurities I tell others that Christ came to cleanse? Oh, Lord Jesus, hear my crying for a consecrated life. For I bite the dust in trying for release from this dark strife. I am very desperate. I know no one who has what I want; in fact I do not know what I want. But I know that if what I have was all there is to Christianity, it is a fraud. Deep in my soul, I echo the words of Robert Browning: "I give the fight up; let there be an end, privacy, an obscure nook for me. I want to be forgotten even by God." [1]

Mark Kremer:

Millions of people down through the centuries have experienced a dark night of the soul, just like Oswald Chambers went through, as he was explaining the depths of his own despair. This morning there may be many of you who are in a similar place. Perhaps those last words of wanting to find an *obscure nook* and just be forgotten, even by God, describe your own feelings.

We know that in the United States there are over fifty eight million adults, more than a quarter of the population that struggle with some sort of diagnosable mental or emotional disorder. Over forty million wrestle with depression.[2] It's a very common thing and one unfortunately that we often don't speak about much in the church. But it's none the less very real and it's complex. There are not simple reasons or causes or answers to depression and emotional struggle.

The intricate balance between body and mind and spirit is something we know is true. Often times we try to separate it out, or segment it out, into different compartments and deal with the symptoms in each. Yet somehow they are all linked together and even to identify the causes of our depression is challenging sometimes.

For many there is just a natural bent to melancholy and introspection that causes people to be so analytical of themselves that they dig a deep hole. For others there is a very physical issue of chemical imbalance, of hormones that are out of balance, or other issues that are going on. Sometimes the prolonged battles of life, whether it's illness or finances or relationships, kind of collapse in on us.

For some it's the battle against sin and just their understanding of God. Sometimes it's deeply spiritual, like it was for Oswald Chambers, just trying to understand this thing of a relationship with Christ and battling through that. For some it's trauma---the trauma of some dramatic thing that happens or abuse that causes the cloud to come and the darkness to descend. And probably for most it's a combination of one or more of those things but, none the less, it's very real and it hits all kinds of people of all different ages.

Many people have battled through, living in the reality of the kind of despair that Oswald Chambers described in a season of his life. They are pastors and missionaries; they are spiritual men and women; they are lost people, people who don't know Jesus. They are people from many different religions. It crosses over all the boundaries.

There are many biblical characters who struggled with this: Job experienced that---deep dark clouds brought on by the circumstances of his life and not helped much by his friends; David, King Saul, Jeremiah and, yes, even the apostle Paul. What is it that God would say to those who struggle with depression, with this dark despair that seems to hang over their lives? That's what we want to look at and talk about this morning.

If you have a Bible with you, turn to 2 Corinthians, Chapter 1.

Now there are many places that we could have gone to in the Scriptures. You think of the Psalms as being a place where there is a *pouring out.* For instance David often despaired in his own heart before God. We could certainly look there and find a great deal of help and find out what God wants to say to us. But I chose 2 Corinthians 1 because we are very familiar with this church and their story because we just finished studying 1 Corinthians. As we looked at it, there were many problems and challenges in the church in Corinth. There was a lot of dysfunction, a lot of unhealthy relationships, unhealthy thinking, sin---there was a lot going on in Corinth that wasn't very good.

Paul hit that head on in his first letter. What we discover as we read through 2 Corinthians is that Paul's first letter had a very profound effect. There was some real movement in the church in Corinth but it came with a price and the price was a considerable amount of anguish, anxiety, fear and sorrow. I think the church in Corinth sort of felt like there was a cloud hanging over it as they really came to grips with just how dysfunctional they were. Paul caught wind of that and what was going on and where they were in their spirit as a people. And he penned this second letter which is meant to encourage them and help them move forward in their journey.

Now one of the things I find extremely helpful about 2 Corinthians, as a whole, is that I think Paul becomes a real person for me in this letter. You know when I read through Acts and consider

everything Paul was doing, you know it just gives us the historical facts and how he's always pressing on and moving on. He gets stoned and gets imprisoned; he just gets up and keeps going. And then you read these letters, this truth is just pouring out of them. And you just sense this spiritual power and dynamic to his life and I'm thinking I can't even relate to Paul. I mean why is it that when I struggle along so much, then I come to this most personal and authentic and revealing letter of Paul and I realize that Paul struggled immensely, even with despair and depression. There are numerous places in this book where he talks about some of those kinds of struggles. But he makes it very clear that he was a fellow struggler who, even at a time in his life as we will see, despaired of life itself.

After a customary greeting we begin with verse three. I'm just going to read verses three to eleven and we'll go back in just a moment and look at them more closely. But I just want you to listen and let what Paul says, what God says, sink in this morning. What is it that jumps out at you this morning as you hear the Word of God as Paul is speaking to discouraged and depressed people?

Verse 3:

> **Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort. For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; who delivered us from so great a peril of death, and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us, you also joining in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through the prayers of many.** (*NASB, 2 Corinthians 1:3-11)

The first thing that immediately jumps out at you as you read through that paragraph is that Paul is someone that I can listen to, who knows what it's like when there is a dark cloud.

Acts 19 describes circumstances that were going on when he was in Asia. There was a great deal of conflict all around him. Everywhere Paul went, there was conflict. There were enemies, riots, imprisonments; there were beatings, there were all of those external things. But there was also an internal struggle**—**fear, anxiety that Paul was experiencing. In fact in chapter seven he says that there was conflict *without* and fears *within.*

Paul knew fear that at times made him, it says in verse eight, burdened down beyond the point that he thought he could even bear**—**beyond the physical ability to bear, no strength to deal with it, so much so that he despaired of life. He really had those thoughts of, "*I really don't want to go on."* He said it felt like **"a sentence of death within ourselves"** in verse nine. That's how heavy and dark that time was. So Paul is somebody we can listen to when it comes to saying "*What does God want to speak into our lives; what's the hope in times like that?"*

If you go back to verse three, Paul immediately points us in a direction.

> **Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort;**

Paul would point us, in our times of darkness and despair, back to the character and nature of God, to go back to worship God, to see God lift our eyes off of ourselves, off of our circumstances and to lift our eyes and our thinking and contemplate and see the character and nature of God. That's what he's challenging the Corinthians to do: to worship God and understand the God that you worship. In this case he mentions two particular characteristics or qualities of God that are so important to those who are struggling with despair and depression.

One is that God is...**the Father of mercies.** He is a God of deep emotional compassion and tenderness. When we're in despair, often times we are telling ourselves things that are untrue. *"God doesn't love me. God doesn't care about me. He may love everybody else but he can't love me; I'm too sinful; I'm too bad; I'm too... too...too."* But God wants us to know that He is the Father of mercies, that he has wonderful deep emotional compassion for us. He's not a disinterested God, unemotionally attached to us. No, He's deeply compassionate. That's who He is.

And He is the...**God of all comfort.** From Him emanates all comfort, all aid, all assistance. That word *comfort* means to come alongside, to be present for, to assist, to aid. It's the very same word Jesus used to describe the Holy Spirit when He would come—to come as the comforter, the One to come alongside, to be present *for* us and *with* us in every struggle. "*God is there,"* is what Paul is saying. You worship and have a God who not only has tender compassion for us but He is there; He's alongside; He's present. And this isn't just *who* He is; this is what He *does*.

It says in verse four:

> **...who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction...**

Paul said it doesn't matter *what* is in our affliction, whether that affliction is a physical affliction or a relational affliction or an emotional affliction. In all affliction God, the comforter, is there. He comforts us; He comes alongside us; He's present to us.

The problem for us, in the midst of our depression and despair, is we don't feel that presence and therefore we want to believe the enemy who says, "*He's not there".* But He's there; God is there. He's promised to be there. It's who He is, the God who is present. But it is very interesting, in this entire passage, *how* God is present to us, because I think we are surprised and sometimes maybe disappointed that God shows up, in the *way* He shows up.

Verse four says:

> **...who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.**

In verse six he says:

> **But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort,**

In verse eleven he says it was

> ...**through the prayers of many...**

...that he received comfort.

In chapter seven, verse six, he says:

> **...God that comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus;**

How does God show up in your life in the darkness and the despair? He sends His servants; He sends people. We need, in our darkness and our despair, in our low times when the cloud is hanging over our heads, to move toward people who are God's instruments, God's agents, to help us through that challenge. Because the Spirit of God is alive and present in us, we can be the presence of Christ to those in their dark time. We often times want to look for some sort of supernatural experience—that God's going to show up and zap us and take away all the clouds and the sun's going to shine through and, "Boom it's over!"—a microwave sort of Christianity. But God has us in a process and in the journey he sends people to come alongside. We need other people. Paul understood that. Part of the reason that God brought him out of his despair and kept him going was for the sake of others. What he did in encouraging and comforting and exhorting and sharing the gospel was for the benefit of others and that kept him going. It was a mission and a purpose, even in his struggle. Even in his suffering there was a purpose that he could identify with and then could understand people. And he could come alongside people and extend the same comfort toward others that he was experiencing in himself.

That's a call that's on every single one of us, that we have a role to play in helping people through their despair. God shows up through people. Has that been true in your life? It's been true in mine. I remember one of the lowest points in my life, when I just really did not know my direction, God sent several people who helped me see that I had something to offer. They believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. I can remember another low point for our family when we were just thinking, "*God, are you even there? Are you paying attention? Do you see us?"* Then a phone call came from a friend five hundred miles away who said, "God just put you on my heart today; I want to encourage you." And I said, "God, You see; You hear; You answered the prayer," but it didn't come in some sort of supernatural experience; it came through people.

The problem for those who suffer with despair and depression is that the very depression and despair that we feel causes us to move away from people—to look, as Oswald Chambers did, for the *quiet nook*, to be left alone. And so the first step that God would call us to, if we are to find help and comfort in our time of despair, is to move toward God's help, which are the people He's put into your life. Sometimes that means you start by going to a doctor; you go to call the church; you find a friend; you plug into a life group; you find a support recovery group; you move towards people. And that will be the hardest thing you have to do at that moment when you're in the darkness and despair. Everything inside of you wants to crawl off into the corner and hide. God is there; He is our comforter but His agent for that comfort is other people.

It's very important that the rest of us, those who don't struggle, to come alongside of someone who does. Or maybe you aren't even aware of people who struggle around you; you're just kind of doing your thing; you're going on your way but then you realize that a significant part of the call of God on your life is to be available and move forward toward people who struggle. Just like Jesus moved towards the people who struggle, we need to all open our eyes and look around.

In verse five Paul reminds us that we have a God; we have Jesus who understands suffering and struggle. Paul compares his sufferings to that of Christ but it is important to hear what he is saying is not, *"Hey I'm suffering as much as Jesus suffered."* Jesus experienced the full gamut of human experience as being fully man. He knew agony; He knew rejection; He knew hurt and agony within. He knew the darkness of being cut off from the Father with whom He had been forever in a perfect intimate relationship. He endured the wrath of God for the sake of those He loved—us. He knows suffering and so we have a God who empathizes and sympathizes with us. He knows and understands suffering. This is not a dead idol in a temple somewhere that has no feelings. This is not a god of our own making; this is not a god like any other. This is **the** God who came down and who lived on this earth and who knows the hurt and the pain and the suffering that goes with walking on this earth. And whatever suffering we may experience, whatever we go through, we need to understand He's been there. We're sharing in the sufferings that Christ also experienced. There is a fellowship of suffering with Christ. There is an intimacy with God that can only be experienced in the dark time, in the suffering. Paul talked about it in Philippians—the fellowship of His sufferings.

And until I'd gone through hard things in my life I thought, "*That's the weirdest thing I've ever heard."* But there is a connection you can have with God, an understanding of how He feels and what He experienced and knowing and partaking together in struggle and suffering that you can't experience in any other way. But, just as our suffering sometimes is abundant like Christ's, so our comfort, he says, is abundant in Christ.

In other words, for every suffering there is an abundant and equal, or greater, comfort. God's never going to leave you without the resources to deal with whatever you have to face in your life. There is abundant comfort, just like it feels at times that there is abundant suffering. God is there. There is help in the present because God is a God of all comfort. But there is also hope for ultimate deliverance as we see beginning in verse nine:

> **...indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; who delivered us from so great a peril of death, and will deliver us, He on whom we have set out hope. And He will yet deliver us...**(vs. 9-10)

Paul is saying we have a sure hope that ultimately we'll be free from whatever we're suffering right now. And that freedom and that deliverance are based on the resurrection of Christ. Jesus Christ rose from the dead. He conquered death. He conquered darkness. He reigns over it and all who set their hope in Him will know deliverance. That's why, back in verse seven, he says:

> **...and our hope for you is firmly grounded...**

In other words we're not just hoping in hope. We're not just wishfully thinking or giving a trite blessing that God's going to see you through. God *will* help you and this is firmly grounded hope.

It's grounded in the fact that the tomb is empty and Jesus is risen. He's alive! And just as He delivered us from sin and death and was resurrected some two thousand years ago, He will yet deliver us fully from whatever dark thing we face. There is a full deliverance for those whose faith and trust is in Him. It will not always be dark and cloudy. There will be a day when the gloom will be turned to joy and celebration and every tear will be gone. And all that we've known of struggle and heartache and fear and anxiety will be no more. That deliverance was in the past through the resurrection of Jesus. It's in the present—you see that in the present tense even in verse ten—He will deliver us; he's saying He is delivering us today; He's present today; He's delivering us day by day through the trials we're in and then there's this glorious final deliverance.

Now for those who struggle with depression, for some this may be for a period and a time and then you will be delivered fully from that dark time. For Oswald Chambers, after four years, somehow the ray of God's grace and light shown in his life and he never struggled the rest of his life with depression and despair. I think Chamber's struggle, if you listen and read what he was saying, was wrestling with trying to perform for God, trying to measure up, trying to kill all the sin until he really got a hold on God's grace and forgiveness and love. And when that happened, the light went on and he was then able to write so much that's been beneficial and helpful to us.

But some will struggle through an entire lifetime. And that life will never seem to fully come around—just enough grace to endure another day, another week, another month. But it is enduring grace that, as Mike prayed earlier in the service, produces maturity in us that grows us in our dependence on God and our intimacy with God.

That's what Paul wanted for them back in verse six. He said that all of this work and comfort that he's been doing he hoped would produce a patient enduring...that is a steady, not giving up. That's the help that God wants to provide today, that enduring help that comes primarily through others. But, through the person of Christ and the Spirit, ultimately there is a deliverance that's based on the resurrection of Christ and who He is. You will be delivered from this despair and the darkness without question.

It's important to notice again that he closes the section by talking about the way, the means by which God brought him out of his despair and depression. It was through the prayers of many.

> **...you also joining in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through the prayers of many.** (vs. 11)

Again we cannot emphasize enough the importance of people coming around those who struggle—to pray for them, to come to them, to be present, to be there in the struggle with them. That is God's means of help and short term deliverance—the people that surround someone in a time of struggle and darkness.

Now I have never fully experienced that kind of deep and dark depression myself. I certainly have known *down times* that seemed long, like a week or two or a month; it seems long at the moment. But I've never known the kind of despair or clinical depression that kind of stops you and doesn't even allow you to function any more. But millions of people, some of you even here today, struggle with that, or you know someone who does.

There are three people who are close to me who have struggled with that kind of depression. I have watched it and I have felt it and I've been involved with it. One of those, whom I asked permission to share a little bit of this with you this morning as we conclude, is my oldest son Tim. He, for a year, was so depressed he rarely, if ever, got out of bed---just completely disabled. During that time it was painful for us as parents to watch that experience. And I want to share, with his permission, an entry from my journal written just two years ago this month when he was in the middle of that. This, to me, reinforces exactly the truth of this passage—that there is help and there is hope. I was clinging to that hope and we had the chance this week to sit down over lunch, me to read this and to talk and share about how God has been working in his life to bring him to a different place.

This is what I wrote in April of '07:

> "(One of the most difficult days of my life in dealing with Tim.) To see where he is today is so painful, so scary, so troubling that I can hardly bear it. The ache in my soul—to see him become all that, God, You have made him to be—is great. Tim is more troubled than anyone that I have ever known personally. How can we help? How should we pray? When will this nightmare for him end? What is the pain in him that has so destroyed him? How have I failed? What do I do about it now? Will he ever get back those days that have been lost? Will You, God, call him out of this black hole? Will You redeem his life from the pit? Is Your arm able to save one so stubborn and self destructive? Yes, Yes, Yes, I believe; I will trust you, Lord, my rest, my deliverer, my strength, my shield, Tim's friend, lover of his being, creator of Tim's heart, Tim's rest, deliverer and hope. God, will you act soon on his behalf and for my sake? Bring glory to Yourself. Please, God, preserve Him mentally, physically, spiritually. Protect him from himself and bring him quickly to the end and turn his heart back to you."

While I have never experienced this myself, I've been alongside. And I believe that is exactly the prayer that God wants us to pray for all those who do. God, be their strength, be their shield, be their hope, because God is God of all comfort and all mercy. There is help for today but you have to move toward the people who are around you, who are there to help. And there is hope for ultimate deliverance, whether it comes in a short time or in a long time; this will not be the defining characteristic of your life. There's a new glorious life for you who struggle. And I want to challenge all of us to move toward those who struggle. For just as they have a tendency to withdraw and pull away and look for that "*obscure nook*," we often times just let them. But we are ambassadors of a God who comes seeking after the one who is hiding in the dark corner and that needs to characterize us as a church. We are here to help. Talk to a pastor; stop at the prayer center today; call this week; go see a doctor; take a step in moving toward the help that God has put there for you. But for all the rest of us, open our eyes; look around. Be ready to be the instrument of God, to give the enduring hope in the moment.

Our Father, we pray this morning for all those who struggle through the dark night of the soul. I pray that in this moment there would be a resolve to move toward the comfort that you offer, that is available. There is hope. I pray that today that those who struggle would lift their eyes and remind themselves again and again and again of the truth of who You are, to doubt the inner voice that would lie and tell them there is no hope and to believe, instead, the voice of God, the truth of Your Word, that there is hope in a God of compassion. Make us all compassionate people, the hands and feet of Yourself, to the glory of Your name, Amen.

[1] *Abandoned To God: the life story of the author of My Utmost for His Highest* by David McCashland. (Discovery House Publishers: Grand Rapids, Michigan)

[2] *http://www.nimh.nih.gov/*

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April 25/26, 2009

Facing Depression

Facing our Stuff: Finding Hope in our Hurts, Hang-ups and Habits

Pastor Mark Kremer

2 Corinthians 1:3-11

Opening Discussion

1. Despair, depression and hopelessness are growing problems today. What do you think are some of the root causes?

2. In what ways do you think our culture has contributed to this problem? What core beliefs and pursuits commonly held in our culture could lead some people to depression and despair?

3. What are the spiritual roots of depression and hopelessness? Are Christ-followers exempt from these struggles? Why or why not?

4. Have you or someone you are close to struggled with depression and hopelessness? What factors contributed to being depressed? How have you (they) dealt with it? What has been helpful? What has not been helpful?

5. Can we be delivered from depression and despair? How? When? By whom?

Bible Study

1. In 2 Corinthians Paul gets very personal as he writes of the challenges he faced while seeking to live for Christ, including battling despair and depression. From what we know of Paul's life, what are some of the reasons he might have struggled with depression? (1:8; 4:7-10; 7:5; 12:7)

2. Immediately we see where Paul focuses his attention (vs. 3, 4). What do we learn about God's character in these verses that gives us hope?

3. How does worship (declaring the worthiness of God) help change the landscape of our emotional struggles?

4. What does it mean that God comforts us? What doesn't it mean? How have you experienced His comfort? (vs. 4,5)

5. God's comforting Paul had a greater purpose than helping him to feel better. According to vs. 4 what is that purpose? How has God's presence and encouragement helped you to comfort others?

6. Suffering is a part of the human experience since the fall. Jesus entered into that suffering as the God-man because He loves us. How did Jesus suffer? In what ways do all of us enter into the sufferings of Jesus? How specifically do Christ-followers experience the sufferings of Christ?

7. How does Jesus hold the key to both understanding our suffering and experiencing comfort in the middle of our struggle? (vs. 5)

8. How does Paul's mission and clear purpose give meaning to both his struggles and his experience of God's comfort? (vs. 6,7) What is the immediate result of God's comfort in the middle of Paul's struggle?

9. How did Paul's experience of God's mercies and comfort give him a firmly grounded hope for all who suffer? (vs. 7)

10. How did the struggles of Paul affect where he put his trust? Why did he believe trusting in God was the only good choice? (vs 9)

11. What does Paul mean that God has delivered us, will now deliver us and will yet deliver us? How do you see this unfolding deliverance taking place in your personal story?

12. In what specific ways did God use other believers to bring comfort to Paul? (vs. 11; see also 7:6)

Application

1. How can thinking biblically help me understand despair and battle against it in my own life?

2. Have I accepted that suffering, including emotional pain/suffering, is a part of the normal human experience in a fallen world? In what ways can good can come from struggle and suffering?

3. How does the fact that Jesus experienced and therefore understands and empathizes with my suffering help me to deal with it in my life?

4. What can I do each day to continue to have a firmly grounded hope in Christ?

5. What does it look like to move towards others when you are struggling? How can other believers help you? Why is this important? What keeps you from moving toward others in times of struggle?

6. What does it look like to move towards people who are struggling? What prevents me from coming alongside those who struggle emotionally? What steps will I take to enter into the suffering and struggles of others?

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